



Claire McCaskill

United States Senator

Summary Report:

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Integrated Service Network 15 Medical Centers
Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital

Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

Report No: 2017 – COL – 05



<http://www.mccaskill.senate.gov>



Columbia Region Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

Since arriving in the United States Senate, Senator Claire McCaskill has made keeping our nation's promises to veterans one of her highest priorities. As the daughter of a World War II veteran, Claire knows the vital sacrifices that veterans have made for the security of our country and in defense of our core values and freedoms. In return for their service, she believes that our country owes veterans a sacred debt of gratitude, which includes access to safe, quality, reliable medical care through our U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) system of hospitals and Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC), both in Missouri and across the country.

Following a series of highly-publicized incidents in 2010 which called into question the high standard of care provided by the St. Louis VA Medical Center – John Cochran Division, Claire reached out to Missouri veterans and VA administrators to address the erosion of confidence in the overall quality of care and customer service at John Cochran VA Medical Center. Although many veterans reported positive experiences with the medical care at John Cochran, concerns persisted among veterans with the customer service they received at the Center and, to a lesser extent, other VA medical facilities in Missouri. In response, Claire announced plans for a “secret shopper” program for veterans—formally named the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program—to rate the quality of service at Missouri VA facilities and to provide the VA with targeted, helpful feedback about veterans' positive and negative experiences at the VA medical centers.

Following the announcement of the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program, Claire and her staff collaborated with leaders from various Missouri veterans' organizations and VA administrators to shape the program. Through this collaboration, a constructive, confidential survey was developed that would be useful to the VA medical centers and act as an independent resource for veterans to make recommendations. The Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program acts as an independent, transparent voice for veterans. It has three major goals:

- (1) Improve communications between veterans and VA medical center personnel;
- (2) Improve overall customer service ratings of VA medical centers in Missouri; and
- (3) Improve the willingness of veterans to positively recommend Missouri VA medical facilities to other veterans.

This report represents the fifth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report for the Columbia region facilities and includes a continuing compilation of survey data as reported directly by Missouri veterans.



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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 26, 2017

To the Director of the Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital,
Members of the Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital, and Missouri's Veterans:

I am pleased to release the results of my fifth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey for the Columbia Region. After reviewing the responses from this round of surveys, I am encouraged by the commitment of both Missouri veterans and VA officials in the Columbia region to come together for the sake of improving veterans' experiences at VA facilities. I recognize the Columbia VA's ongoing efforts to address issues regarding healthcare and customer service quality, and I hope that current and future leadership use the feedback contained in this report to identify priorities for improved customer service.

When I first proposed this "secret shopper" program, I told you that I would not be happy until Missouri's veterans are happy. I mean it as much now as I did then. Today, I am pleased that more and more veterans are telling me how the Columbia region VA has changed for the better in recent years—how wayfinding is getting better; how wait times have improved; how cleanliness and scheduling efficiency have increased. These are performance markers to be proud of, but there is still more work to do. The report suggests veterans' satisfaction with Columbia region VA facilities remains very high; however, we must be careful to avoid drawing too strong a conclusion based on the number of responses. Looking ahead, it is important that we keep the momentum growing that we have established over the last few years with the robust participation among our veterans. We must sustain this timely, transparent process to ensure our veterans are satisfied with their VA health care experience. To that end, I have instructed my staff to continue working with the veterans' organizations in executing a robust outreach strategy to promote even greater participation.

I remain appreciative of the hard work and professionalism shown by the VA administrators, employees and staff. I know they are committed, as I am, to ensuring veterans have a positive experience while at Missouri VA medical centers. I am proud of their willingness to implement many of the recommendations outlined in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Reports. It appears that the leadership at the Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital recognize their tremendous obligation in serving Missouri's veterans, and I appreciate their commitment to responding to the concerns expressed to me in these surveys within 30 days.

Additionally, I am grateful for the help and support of my partners at the Columbia region VA and several Missouri veterans' organizations. However, most importantly, I am grateful to our veterans for their service, sacrifice and support for the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program. Together we *can* and *will* improve the quality of customer care in Missouri VA medical facilities, starting right here in Columbia.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Claire McCaskill". The signature is stylized with large, flowing loops and a prominent "C" at the beginning.

Claire McCaskill
United States Senator

The following members of my staff participated in the preparation of this report:

Justin Klocke
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Would you like your voice heard?

Veterans can complete a survey of their current experience at a VA facility at:
<http://mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp/>.



REPORT

We have reviewed the responses received from the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program (VCSP) survey for the Columbia region. The small number of survey results that we received from veterans raising specific concerns about their care or benefits were reviewed by senate office caseworkers and responded to on a case-by-case basis if casework was necessary. The scope of our review included, but was not necessarily limited to, comments received about Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital and its Community Based Outpatient Clinics (collectively referred to as Truman VA or VA facilities) through the period ending April 9, 2017. Comments received after that period will be reviewed in the next Summary Report.

The objectives of our review were to:

- Identify specific concerns from veterans regarding the customer service received while interacting with the Truman VA;
- Identify areas where communication can be improved between veterans and the Truman VA;
- Identify criticisms impacting the overall customer service ratings of the Truman VA;
- Identify concerns that impact the willingness of veterans to positively recommend the Truman VA to other veterans;
- Report the full range of responses received from the veterans regarding the Truman VA; and
- Issue a public report of the survey conclusions and resolutions of any identified issues.

Our methodology included reviewing responses submitted on the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program surveys, identifying any specific urgent issues and working directly with the veteran to get an immediate response from the VA and submitting other concerns identified in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program to the VA. Some of the veterans elected not to take immediate action regarding issues identified in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey.

Prior to the issuance of the report, representatives of various veterans' service organizations reviewed the Summary Report and made recommendations for suggested improvements at the VA facilities. Their comments and recommendations have been incorporated in this report.

The VA has provided responses to all recommendations.



SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) oversees the largest healthcare system in the nation through a network of 18 Veterans Integrated Service Networks. Missouri is mostly comprised in Veterans Integrated Service Network 15 with a large portion of Southwestern Missouri in Veterans Integrated Service Network 16 and small portions of Northern Missouri in Veterans Integrated Service Network 23. In order for the VA to gauge the satisfaction of veterans receiving care at individual VA medical centers, the VA established the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients in 2002. The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients was designed to consolidate multiple VA health care survey programs into a single program that collects data on both inpatient and outpatient experiences of veterans at a VA medical center. The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients focuses on the quality of care.

With the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients serving as a blueprint, Claire's office, veteran leaders and the Truman VA worked together to develop an independent survey to serve as a resource veterans can use to make recommendations to each individual VA medical center regarding the quality of customer service.

Scope

The scope of this review included, but was not necessarily limited to, those VA facilities located in the Columbia region and statewide locations that received a Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey through the period ending April 9, 2017. In the Columbia region, two hundred eighty-seven (287) responses were received during that period.

Information used to complete this report included:

- Completed surveys collected from veterans who received care at a VA facility.
- Communications with and information received from representatives from the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vietnam Veterans of America, the Missouri Association of Veterans Organizations and VA officials.

Methodology

During our review, a database established by and internal to the senate office was used to accumulate results and compile data in tabulated form. In instances where veterans reported the need for immediate or urgent assistance in response to their case, additional information was gathered so the VA could respond immediately to their needs.

Survey questionnaires were available through veterans' service organizations, from VA patient representatives and online at www.mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp. Veterans self-reported their

customer service experience at the VA facility either directly online or by submitting a written survey to a veterans' service organization or to Claire's office that was then entered into the database.

All survey responses, not including any identifying respondent information, were provided to the VA. In addition, all survey responses were reviewed independently by representatives of the veterans' service organizations. Specific comments were selected to be included in the report based on the significance and relevance of the comment to the statement. Those comments not selected for reporting were taken into consideration when writing the report but were not directly quoted due to the comments either not having as significant a level of relevance to the statement offered or missing key information to draw a conclusion.

Limitations

Data presented are compiled from survey information submitted voluntarily by veterans. The comments included were obtained directly from the surveys or from veterans' service organization representatives. These comments were not verified by the senate office through additional procedures for accuracy, validity or completeness.

This is not meant to be a scientifically-constructed study.



OBSERVATIONS & RESULTS

Background

This Summary Report covers the period ending April 9, 2017. During this period, two hundred eighty-seven (287) survey responses were received in the Columbia region. In the survey, veterans reported the era that they served. All eras of veterans from World War II to present day were represented with Vietnam era veterans comprising over sixty-six percent (66.9%) of the respondents. Some veterans indicated they served in multiple eras of service. Below is a table which details the service eras of veterans participating in the survey:

WWII	0.3%
Korean War	3.5%
Vietnam War	66.9%
Desert Shield/Desert Storm	22.3%
Iraq/Afghanistan	12.5%
Other	13.9%

Survey respondents were asked to indicate their gender. Two hundred eighty-seven (287) responses were received to this question. Below is a table which indicates the gender composition of respondents:

Male	92.0%
Female	8.0%

In the survey, over eighty-one percent (81.5%) of the veterans indicated that they had received services at the Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital. Some veterans visited multiple VA facilities. Below is a table which describes where the veterans received treatment:

Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital	81.5%
Fort Leonard Wood	3.5%

Jefferson City	4.5%
Kirksville	2.1%
Lake of the Ozarks	4.9%
Mexico	3.5%
Marshfield	7.0%
Sedalia	3.8%
St. James Clinic	2.4%
Other	2.8%

These veterans utilized multiple services while at the Columbia region VA medical facilities. Two hundred eighty-seven (287) responses indicated that veterans utilized services from the following VA clinic categories:

Primary Care	27.5%	Emergency Room	7.0%	Extended Care	2.1%
Outpatient Clinic	20.9%	Mental Health Services	9.1%	Dental	3.5%
Pharmacy	7.3%	X-Ray	6.3%	Laboratory	25.1%
Travel/Enrollment	3.5%	Main Lobby	10.5%	Specialist Visit	23.0%
Inpatient Care	4.2%	Women's Clinic	0.0%	Spinal Cord Injury Unit	0.7%
Prosthetics	2.8%	Podiatry	5.6%	Family Health (CHAMPVA)	1.4%
Claim & Pension Exam	4.5%	Other	27.2% (examples: Surgery, Cardiology, etc.)		

Review of survey question results

This section summarizes the results of each of the survey statements. Results from the most recent survey (R5) are marked “current,” and results from previous surveys (R1 – R4) are also included. Beginning with the Summary Report (R3), survey questions and rating scales appear differently from previous reports. In previous versions of the survey, veterans were posed questions with binary response options: “Yes” or “No.” Since 2015, survey questions and response options have been rewritten to allow veterans to choose an appropriate response in a range of options from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” Survey questions now appear as a statement, and veterans have rated their agreement with the statement on a spectrum that spans from Strong Agreement to Strong Disagreement.

1. Ease of scheduling appointments

The reported ease of scheduling appointments at Truman VA facilities remained high but has decreased slightly for this round of surveys; concerns were noted.

I was able to schedule my appointment easily.

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:				85.2%	82.9 %
No:				14.8%	17.1%
Strongly Agree:	60.6%	62.8%	56.0%		
Mostly Agree:	20.2%	19.6%	23.3%		
Neutral:	8.4%	6.3%	8.5%		
Mostly Disagree:	4.5%	3.3%	4.5%		
Strongly Disagree:	6.3%	8.1%	7.8%		

Two hundred eighty-seven (287) responses were received to this statement with 232 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they did not have a problem with scheduling their appointments at the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region. Veterans who indicated having trouble with making appointments continued to state most of their issues were with scheduling appointments over the phone and being unable to reach VA support staff who could schedule an appointment. A few veterans expressed concern with their inability to schedule follow up appointments the same day due to the follow up appointment occurring outside the required 90-day window for the VA to schedule follow up appointments.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“We cannot call the clinic staff directly. We have to through the Columbia hospital. I have gone more than a day just trying to get through to the hospital. The Marshfield staff are super and responsive. The hospital staff can be very abrupt and at times rude. I understand that they probably receive hundreds of call daily, but I do not consider that to be an excuse for their behavior. I am a retired mental health executive and would never have accepted that type of behavior.”*

- *“All calls are routed to Columbia, then rerouted to a department in Columbia, then rerouted again to Sedalia where you leave a message on voicemail. Then you will be contacted within 3 business days. Too convoluted.”*
- *“Scheduling was easy. Harry S Truman personnel are ALWAYS helpful.”*

Recommendation: Continue to work on improvements to the existing phone scheduling system, so that streamlining the scheduling process is made a top priority. Also, consider options that will allow a veteran to schedule his/her next appointment even though he/she is outside the 90 day window.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

We are expanding staffing at our Community Based Outpatient Clinics to allow each clinic to take their own calls, significantly lowering the call volume to our primary call center. Contingency plans are in place to allow the primary call center to provide back up for community clinics if needed. Additional telephone system enhancements such as voicemail options and notification regarding expected wait and place in line are being evaluated as well as increased access to automated functions for medication renewals and appointment cancellations. Also, options such as text message reminders are being explored. Patients are now able to schedule appointments up to 390 days into the future in all clinics or may choose to receive a reminder to schedule closer to the time of the planned visit.

2. Ease of access to the appointment location at the facility

More veterans continued to report that they were able to easily navigate the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region in order to find the location of their appointments.

I was able to find my way to my appointment easily.

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:				97.6%	97.6%
No:				2.4%	2.4%
Strongly Agree:	77.7%	75.7%	73.5%		
Mostly Agree:	11.5%	13.0%	13.0%		
Neutral:	7.3%	6.3%	6.0%		
Mostly Disagree:	1.0%	0.8%	2.3%		
Strongly Disagree:	2.4%	4.2%	5.3%		

Two hundred eighty-seven (287) responses were received to this statement with 256 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that it was easy to find their way to appointments at the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region. The continued improvement in veterans being able to navigate the VA facilities is a strong sign that the VA has taken the necessary steps to help veterans find their appointment location.

Although the vast majority of veterans were able to reach their appointment site easily, the veterans who had difficulty finding their appointments indicated that their navigation was adversely impacted by the facility renovations underway.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“All people working at this VA are helpful. Doctors, Nurses and even the guy mopping the floor. If you look lost, they ask if they can help.”*
- *“Signs clearly direct you where to go. If you are unable to find your way, staff are waiting near the entrance to help direct you.”*
- *“New Construction. Until I learn it, it is confusing.”*

Recommendation: Ensure that all interior and exterior signage is updated to reflect current changes due to construction. Consider printing directories and campus maps so that veterans can find their appointments quickly and efficiently.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Our Facilities Management Service continues to improve wayfinding, both interior and exterior. The engineering staff has submitted projects that will add new exterior signage as well as new signage in all elevator lobbies. Our new Intensive Care Unit and Surgical Inpatient Unit will be included in the new interior signage. In addition, we are evaluating digital signage for our outpatient clinics and an exterior digital billboard. We are in the process of updating a facility map that will be distributed to Veterans when they come to the facility.

3. Cleanliness of the facility

Veterans reported greater satisfaction with the cleanliness of the VA facilities during this survey period.

At the time of my visit, the VA facility was clean.

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Excellent:				67.3%	51.2%
Above Average:				22.3%	29.3%
Average/ Fair:				8.4%	17.1%
Below Average:				0.4%	2.4%
Poor:				1.6%	0.0%
Strongly Agree:	79.8%	74.5%	69.5%		
Mostly Agree:	14.3%	17.6%	17.0%		
Neutral:	4.5%	5.8%	7.0%		
Mostly Disagree:	1.0%	0.8%	2.8%		
Strongly Disagree:	0.3%	1.3%	3.8%		

Two hundred eighty-seven (287) responses were received to this statement with 270 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region were clean. Four (4) veterans strongly disagreed or mostly disagreed that the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region were clean. For those veterans who reported concerns with cleanliness, their comments focused on the condition of certain restrooms.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“No trash or clutter, recently vacuumed carpet, walls and decor were clean.”*
- *“Everything appeared clean and in order in every area seen, save for fenced off exterior construction, which is perfectly understandable.”*
- *“Bathrooms were rough.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts to ensure that Environmental Management Service staff maintain their frequent monitoring of high-traffic areas, such as restrooms and entrances, and that staff are notified as soon as a visitor notices evidence of uncleanliness or obstructions to an area.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

We have implemented a supplemental program to have contractor personnel perform deep cleaning of restrooms in conjunction with the routine cleaning performed daily by our housekeeping staff. Facilities Management Service is updating restrooms continually to create a more aesthetically pleasing restroom environment and to improve construction materials that are easier to maintain and clean.

4. Amount of time to be seen by a provider from the date requesting the appointment

Veterans’ wait times improved since the last survey period. The percentage of veterans expressing that they were not seen by their provider in a reasonable amount of time declined, while the percentage of veterans expressing that they were seen in a reasonable amount of time increased.

From the date I initially requested the appointment, I was able to be seen by my provider in a reasonable amount of time.

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:				85.3%	78.0%
No:				14.7%	22.0%
Strongly Agree:	63.8%	62.8%	51.3%		
Mostly Agree:	15.3%	13.4%	20.0%		
Neutral:	10.1%	10.0%	12.8%		
Mostly Disagree:	3.8%	4.6%	4.8%		

Strongly Disagree:	7.0%	9.2%	11.3%		
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Two hundred eighty-seven (287) responses were received to this statement with 227 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were able to see their provider in a reasonable amount of time at the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region. In some cases, veterans reported that they had to wait for longer periods of time for specific services. Also, in several departments, veterans reported delays which may be the result of personnel shortages.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“It took 6 months. I tried using the VA, and I gave up because of the service I received. I currently go to my local doctor in Jefferson City when issues arise.”*
- *“My wait was not that long of a wait. I had to reschedule once, and the nurse was very helpful in assisting me.”*
- *“The podiatrist is often double and triple booked. He needs help.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts to ensure that staff vacancies are filled in a timely manner to reduce wait times and improve patient access. Ensure that patients’ scheduling requests are responded to in 1 to 3 days from point of contact.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

We will continue filling staff vacancies in as timely a manner as possible. A new hiring model is under development for Medical Support Assistants who handle scheduling, telephones and daily clinic functions such as checking in patients. This model will be in place by early summer 2017. Based on successes at other VA facilities, we expect this process to significantly reduce the amount of time it takes to recruit and fill these key positions. Full or near-full staffing of these positions will help reduce any administrative delays patients may encounter when seeking care.

5. Communication by the VA staff while the veteran was at the facility

Historically, poor communication between patients and VA personnel has been the main reason veterans and their families contact the senate office. While many veterans experienced positive communications with VA staff, the data shows a slightly higher percentage of veterans reporting negative communication exchanges.

VA staff communicated well with me and clearly explained what was going on.

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:				88.5%	87.8%
No:				11.5%	12.2%
Strongly Agree:	65.5%	67.4%	61.3%		
Mostly Agree:	15.3%	15.5%	16.8%		
Neutral:	8.4%	8.3%	7.0%		

Mostly Disagree:	5.2%	3.7%	7.8%		
Strongly Disagree:	5.6%	5.0%	7.3%		

Two hundred eighty-seven (287) responses were received to this statement with 232 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that VA staff communicated effectively with them at the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region. Several survey respondents commented on unsatisfactory communication experiences with VA staff.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“My new primary care provider was more interested in talking over me, ignoring me, and insulting me than in the care I received. She ordered me to start taking a medication that is not helpful or appropriate.”*
- *“The VA staff is really good at explaining why the treatment is possibly delayed, on time, or ahead of schedule. They also ask about flu shots and other vaccinations that are needed for me.”*
- *“Sometimes it is difficult to communicate with my primary doctor on questions that arise between visits. There are lots of staff filters that mostly help, but direct patient-to-doctor contact is difficult even with the patient portal.”*

Recommendation: Realizing that staff turnover forces veterans to establish new relationships with providers on a regular basis, emphasize the importance of staff taking the time to listen to their patients’ concerns. Let veterans know that their feedback is not only valued, but it is vital to their quality of care and success of treatment.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Improving communication with Veterans is a major emphasis this year, both in outpatient and inpatient settings. We have instituted messaging boards in the inpatient rooms to better communicate who comprises the care team, what the plans are for the day and how we are doing with pain control. In the outpatient setting, we are working to improve real time communication about wait times in the clinic. We work individually with providers when complaints are received and, if needed, provide additional training in customer service and communication skills.

6. Receiving necessary care while at VA facility

Efficiency of care is a key indicator of strong customer service satisfaction. Accordingly, the data suggests that a large majority of veterans were pleased with the VA’s healthcare efficiency. Notably, the percentage of veterans reporting they did not receive the necessary care has decreased since (R4).

I was able to get the care I needed during my visit.

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Strongly Agree:	64.5%	66.5%	61.5%		
Mostly Agree:	16.0%	13.0%	14.3%		
Neutral:	8.4%	6.3%	9.3%		
Mostly Disagree:	3.5%	3.3%	6.0%		
Strongly Disagree:	7.7%	10.9%	9.0%		

Two hundred eighty-seven (287) responses were received to this statement with 231 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they received the care they needed during their visit. Most of the concerns expressed by veterans related to communication between the veteran and their provider.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“During my two visits to the emergency room, appropriate steps were taken to diagnose and treat the issues that I had at the time with medication provided in a timely manner.”*
- *“The nurses in Oncology/Hematology told me that they basically had no time for me. Also I was refused care by the doctor of Oncology/Hematology. She was too busy complaining of not having an office and upset that veterans are going out of the VA system for care.*
- *“At the HST VA Hospital, you just receive good care, always have, staff is interested in helping anyway they can. Many enjoy making it a pleasant experience.”*

Recommendation: Continue to improve communication between departments and streamline referral protocols so that patients can quickly and efficiently access the care they need. Also, consider how improved communication between medical staff and patients can positively impact healthcare efficiency as patients gain a better understanding of their care/treatment plan.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Communication among members of the health care team in a complex environment is always a challenge. We have worked and continue to work on processes and information flow so that all members of the health care team are knowledgeable and able to assist Veterans in obtaining services.

7. Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility

The reported respect shown at Truman VA facilities remains very high. Over eighty-six (86.8%) percent of the responses received reported respectful interactions between veterans and staff at Truman VA facilities.

I was treated with respect while at the VA facility.

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:				89.6%	87.8%
No:				10.4%	12.2%
Strongly Agree:	76.3%	75.7%	70.5%		
Mostly Agree:	10.5%	13.0%	14.0%		
Neutral:	6.6%	5.0%	9.3%		
Mostly Disagree:	2.8%	1.3%	2.3%		
Strongly Disagree:	3.8%	5.0%	4.0%		

Two hundred eighty-seven (287) responses were received to this statement with 249 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were treated with respect while at the VA medical facilities in the Truman VA region. The data suggests that current VA initiatives regarding employee customer service training are working as intended. However, veterans still report that additional measures should be taken to ensure a respectful environment.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“These personnel here are very professional, and I feel they have the veterans’ best interest at heart.”*
- *“I almost feel as though I was discriminated against because of my age and being so young. I feel like they looked at me and was like ‘he’s young; we don’t have to treat him well.’”*
- *“This was my first visit as a patient to VA. Friendliness everywhere. Staff escorted me to find labs, clinics, prosthetics, etc. Staff got up from their work station to take me.”*

Recommendation: Continue efforts to educate all VA staff on the importance placed in “*I CARE: VA Core Values and Characteristics*.” Those employees who best display *I CARE* values deserve to be properly recognized, and those employees identified as lacking should receive additional guidance.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

We implemented an I CARE employee recognition award and recognize employees at our monthly awards ceremony who have been nominated for some action or service that merits recognition. Nominations often come from Veterans, their family members and visitors as well as from co-workers. Depending upon the nature of the action or service, one employee is recognized monthly for each of the I CARE core values – integrity, commitment, advocacy, respect, and excellence. A summary of actions taken by the employees that modeled the core value is read to those attending the ceremony, reinforcing those values with concrete examples. In addition, we will be developing customer service standards of behavior and training all employees during the next year. Respect will be an area of special emphasis.

8. Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

The data suggests that veterans are increasingly more firm in their willingness to positively recommend the Truman VA facilities to other veterans. Since Summary Report 3 (R3), willingness to recommend Truman VA facilities has increased from 63.3% (R3) to 69.8% (R4) to 71.8% (R5).

I would recommend this VA facility to other veterans.

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:				90.3%	82.1%
No:				9.7%	17.9%
Strongly Agree:	71.8%	69.8%	63.3%		
Mostly Agree:	11.1%	16.7%	18.0%		
Neutral:	8.0%	5.0%	8.3%		
Mostly Disagree:	2.8%	1.6%	4.0%		
Strongly Disagree:	6.3%	6.7%	6.5%		

Two hundred eighty-seven (287) responses were received to this statement with 238 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they would recommend the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region to other veterans. However, concerns were noted.

Below are sample positive comments from veterans:

- *“To us, we find that the VA provides all that one person needs. The doctors are more approachable than at regular hospitals. The time wait is not long as some other hospitals either in the urgent care or hospital.”*
- *“I have referred Veterans to the VA. Some remember the old days, but the VA system has gotten better over the years. I used to have to wait all day in triage before being seen and now it is just like any other medical facility. Most of the time I am seen before my appointment times.”*
- *“The Harry S Truman VA hospital in Columbia is probably one of the best operated VA systems in the country.”*

Below are sample concerns from veterans:

- *“I think the issue is mostly due to being understaffed and ill-equipped.”*
- *“I have used this facility for many years, and the care I have received has always been outstanding. However, there are several services (such as mammograms and pap smears) for which I and others must be referred outside of the VA system.”*
- *“I really cannot recommend any VA facility to any eligible veteran. We deserve better than that. The current VA Healthcare system exists only to keep INELIGIBLE "veterans" from*

gumming up the surrounding civilian hospital emergency rooms with their self-destructive-lifestyle health issues.”

Recommendation: Continue present efforts that give quality of care and customer service priority of place in the Truman VA Healthcare System.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Patient satisfaction remains a top priority for this facility.

9. Overall experience with personal doctor or nurse

A veteran’s confidence in his/her personal doctor or nurse is key to evaluating overall customer service experience. Since the (R4) report, veterans’ satisfaction with their physician or nurse remains high, but has decreased slightly by 2.6%. The data suggests that medical staff is committed to providing veterans’ high quality health care experiences, but additional steps are required to maintain the improvement seen in previous years.

How would you rate your overall experience with your personal doctor or nurse?

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Excellent:	65.2%	65.7%	60.5%		
Above Average (Good):	16.4%	18.5%	19.3%		
Average/Fair:	9.8%	6.9%	11.5%		
Below Average:	3.5%	2.1%	3.3%		
Poor:	5.2%	6.7%	5.5%		

Two hundred eighty-seven (287) responses were received to this question with 234 reporting “Excellent” or “Above Average” experiences with their personal doctor or nurse. Veterans who described positive experiences frequently commented on clear and empathetic communication and high quality care. Conversely, veterans who expressed dissatisfaction with their personal doctor/nurse had several different reasons for their responses, including: poor follow-up, communication, and longer-than-expected wait times.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“My doctor has been great to not only discuss my medical issues, but we also discuss my personal life as it relates to any medical issues. I have been seen by both doctors and nurse practitioners, and they were equally respectful to my medical needs.”*
- *“Just be treated the way you would like to be treated. I'm not looking for handouts but would like for my family to receive the benefits they deserve for having to deal with me and my issues that I obtained for serving in OIF and OEF.”*

- *“I just felt like I was a bother to the person who saw me. She continually cut me off when I tried to say something. She had no interest in the supporting documentation I brought with me. She would say that's not my decision, I just need to answer the questions on this case as directed and someone else will make the decision. When directed to move a body part and I stopped when something hurt, I felt like she thought I was lying. I felt like she was trying to trick me for some reason. She would have me do motions repeatedly, up to three times.”*

Recommendation: Continue to recognize those staff members who demonstrate outstanding care to veterans, while encouraging all staff to devote sufficient time to listening to veterans’ concerns and providing clear, sympathetic feedback.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Employee satisfaction and employee recognition remain top priorities for this facility.

10. Overall experience at the VA facility

Since the last report, satisfaction with veterans’ overall experiences at Truman VA Medical Centers has remained steady. The VA Medical Center’s continued focus on respect and communication through the “I-CARE” Program appears to help facilitate better experiences for veterans, but further actions are required to continue growth in veterans’ satisfaction.

How would you rate your overall experience with the VA Medical Centers?

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Excellent:	52.6%	55.3%	49.0%	54.0%	46.2%
Above Average (Good):	25.4%	23.5%	24.0%	25.3%	15.4%
Average/Fair:	9.4%	12.6%	14.5%	11.4%	23.1%
Below Average:	5.6%	2.5%	6.8%	3.8%	7.7%
Poor:	7.0%	6.3%	5.8%	5.5%	7.7%

Two hundred eighty-seven (287) responses were received to this question with 224 indicating “Excellent” or “Above Average” overall experiences at VA Medical Centers; thirty-six (36) reported “Below Average” or “Poor” overall experience.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Wait times for some appointments are longer than necessary. Wait times to see doctor when at the appointment are longer than necessary. I show up on time; the doctor should be on time. Just because the nurse places me in the room, I should not have to wait 30 minutes for the doctor. I know that when I am placed in the room on time, they consider that they are on schedule, yet I wait.”*
- *“Not all Veterans are going to be happy, there is always room for improvement no matter where a person goes, even in the civilian sector. VA is the ONLY place for a veteran to*

treat! When a complaint is filed, take it serious and move on. Thank you VA for loving us vets; please hire those who truly love serving as I did!"

- *"My local clinic is good but limited in capabilities. This requires me to travel 100 miles one way to Truman VA. The hospital is excellent, and I have never had a problem being referred to local civilian care for cancer treatment, physical therapy, or other specialty care."*

Recommendation: Continue to build on improvements with patient experience by implementing recommendations found in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program (VCSP) and VA Survey of Healthcare Experiences of Patient (SHEP). Ensure that stakeholder feedback and veterans' concerns are at the forefront of all efforts.

VA Medical Center's Response:

Our Customer Service Board reviews stakeholder feedback from a variety of sources, e.g., SHEP, VCSP, reviews from Facebook, etc., in order to determine focus areas for enhanced customer service. In addition, Patient Centered Care principles including "the Voice of the Veteran" are embodied in much of what we do to meet our mission of outstanding service to Veterans and other customers.



VETERANS' RECOMMENDATIONS

The current Summary Report discloses various issues regarding the customer service received by veterans and other matters as presented below. This section summarizes the recommendations that veterans have made to improve the VA facility they visited. Most of the recommendations from veterans referenced the same issues outlined throughout this report.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"If a privately owned hospital won't employ a certain doc, neither should VA. Veterans should have the option to see a non-VA doc. When a person has multiple medical issues there should be one point of contact actively communicating and coordinating care with all providers, yes each doc has a nurse but no body communicates. I mean one coordinator per patient. Patient advocates can't really advocate because they work for the VA. They listen to my issues but NEVER are able to get issues resolve."*
- *"Let patients call their clinics directly instead of through Columbia. Computer problems with appointments and prescriptions sent in to pharmacy."*
- *"I would love to see the dental clinic expanded so that I could take advantage of it too!"*
- *"Actually provide continuity of care and communication. There is no reason that I can be expected to stay on top of my care. The VA absolutely fails when compared to private clinical care. Where are the phone calls and letters when I fail to stay on top of my care? Who is looking over my shoulder to ensure that without fail, I maintain a certain level of care?"*
- *"Since I have to travel about 90 miles one way, I would like to see more doctors on the same day I visit not just one or two. This would save me time and money. Also it would save the VA money with travel expenses."*
- *"The only suggestion that I have is that there should be more explanation of what amount the patient is responsible to pay. My radiation was scheduled at another facility (to benefit me because it was in my hometown) which I appreciated. I had 33 radiation treatments and received a bill for \$50 for each treatment. I was not expecting that. I understand that I have co-pays but the amounts were not explained upfront. I feel that I received excellent treatment and am very thankful for the VA health system."*

- *“Hire and keep more Medical personnel and hold support personnel accountable for their service. Do away with auto-answering systems or have someone that has used the service be involved in the programming!”*
- *“Just keep putting Veterans first. Columbia needs a better dental clinic to meet the needs.”*
- *“Please ditch TriWest Healthcare Alliance. Every time I make an appointment through the V.A. for outside health assistance, TriWest cancels before the appointment with the excuse that the time allotted is expired.”*
- *“Better equipment! I think the biggest issue with the VA clinics is the lack of equipment for the doctors and nurses to do their jobs.”*



RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONALISM OF VA EMPLOYEES BY VETERANS

Which provider or department that does an excellent job do you want Senator McCaskill to know about?

There are many great professionals working in the Columbia region's VA medical facilities, and it is important to acknowledge their hard work and dedication. Two hundred five (205) responses were received to this question acknowledging veterans' appreciation for a provider or a department at the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region.

Below are sample responses from veterans. At the request of the VA, employees' names were replaced with their initials to protect their privacy. All responses, in full, were provided to the VA Administration to alert them to employees who were singled out for their professionalism and performance:

- *"SSM Cancer Care Center at St Joe's West does an excellent job!"*
- *All of the staff at Marshfield is great. Dr. D is the best. Dr. P is a lifesaver. Everyone goes out of their way to take care of your problems. This office is the gold standard."*
- *"The entire blue team are absolutely phenomenal. From the nurses to administrative professionals, I have never had any issue getting my concerns heard, and any tests or imaging scheduled."*
- *"My heart doctors need some recognition. They don't take any time off for themselves so it seems. I am so proud of them. I am now in cardio rehab and I am alive!"*
- *"I have been cared for in three different VA medical hospitals, two in Missouri and one in South Dakota. In my opinion the Harry S. Truman VA facility in Columbia, Missouri is heads above the others. Excellent facility and excellent staff. Always a pleasant experience going there."*
- *"My main clinic (the White Clinic) seems to do an excellent job with appointments and communication. The emergency room, in my experience, has been extremely fast (especially compared the stories that I hear about from other hospitals) and provided the care that I needed."*
- *"My experience with St. James and the Harry S Truman hospital have been nothing but exceptional! The professionals at both facilities go above and beyond to meet my needs."*

- *“Dr D at the Marshfield CBOC is truly a caring doctor and has helped me get the help I need for my MST. He cared and got me help. Because of that, I'm on track to a better life.”*
- *“Pulmonary clinic is above reproach, always polite, cheerful and treats everyone with the utmost respect. The doctors are the most thorough and compassionate doctors there are.”*

Recommendation: The men and women of the Truman VA Healthcare System provide superior levels of care for our nation's veterans. Their dedication, compassion, and professionalism deserve our praise and respect; efforts should continue to recognize those who best represent the Truman VA Healthcare System.

VA Medical Center's Response:

Employee satisfaction and employee recognition remain top priorities for this facility.



FOLLOW UP ON VA MEDICAL CENTER'S RESPONSES

Since the first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center agreed to act on a number of the recommendations outlined in the previous reports, or they were already taking action on some of the concerns mentioned in the summary. This section reports the status of the implementation of those commitments.

Amount of time to be seen by a provider from the date requesting the appointment

In the fourth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, *"We have been very successful in recruiting new and replacement staff in the past year. Our significant reduction in non-VA care expenditures is attributable to hiring clinicians and support personnel so those clinical services can be provided in-house."* in response to veterans' concerns about personnel shortages as it related to apparent delays in scheduling appointments. What is the current status on the number of vacancies at the Truman VA Medical Center, and what steps are being taken to improve the recruiting and hiring process?

VA Medical Center's Response:

We are recruiting actively for several clinical and administrative positions at this time. Despite some challenges, we continue to work diligently to fill vacancies in a timely manner.

Communication by the VA staff while the veteran was at the facility

In the fourth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, *"We support the philosophy espoused above. In order to keep up with the increasing demand for health care services, our providers must be as efficient and thorough as possible."* in regard to recommendations made to improve communication by the VA staff with the veteran. What current programs or initiatives are aimed at improving communication exchanges between VA medical staff and veterans?

VA Medical Center's Response:

Improving communication with Veterans is a major point of emphasis at this facility. Messaging boards in inpatient rooms and real time communication of wait times in clinics are two current examples of initiatives. We work with individual providers to improve customer service and communication skills as needed.

Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility

In the fourth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, *"In the past year, an additional employee recognition award for displaying I CARE core values was added so that additional staff members could be recognized. Upon the retirement of our previous Patient Advocate, management agreed to create and fill a second Patient Advocate position."* What is the status of the second Patient Advocate position, and what are this person's primary job duties? Has the Truman VA experienced positive feedback from veterans as a result of the second Patient Advocate?

VA Medical Center's Response:

The second Patient Advocate has been in place since the end of November. That individual was trained by the first Patient Advocate. They are located near each other on the first floor of the facility with direct access to Veterans. Our underlying management philosophy is for concerns/issues to be resolved at the point of concern. When concerns/issues brought to the Patient Advocates are not resolved immediately, they are referred to the appropriate service for resolution. Both Patient Advocates keep up with current VA directives and attend monthly network and national conference calls. Also, we now have a TriWest representative present in the facility who can respond to Choice Program concerns.

Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

In the fourth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, *"The Veteran and Family Advisory Council continued to evolve as a valuable feedback resource for new initiatives at Truman VA. The council meets every two months. In addition to the Veteran and Family Advisory Council, members have volunteered to serve on other medical center committees and task groups. This proactive initiative has allowed us to receive feedback in a timelier manner, because we are not waiting for reports of concerns, problems or compliments,"* in response to veterans' concerns about their willingness to positively recommend the Truman VA to other veterans. What is the current status of the Council, and how has the feedback gained from Council members been used to improve the quality of care and experience at the Truman VA Health Care System?

VA Medical Center's Response:

The Veteran and Family Advisory Council meets every other month. Feedback and advice from this Council is shared with appropriate services as well as Truman VA's Customer Service Board. In the past year, the Council has provided feedback that was acted upon for several initiatives including (1) a proposal to obtain software and hardware for Get Well Network, a patient feedback and evaluation tool; (2) proposals concerning maps and other methods of wayfinding for Veterans and visitors; (3) recommendations regarding priorities for patient feedback provided in patient surveys; and (4) recommendations to the onsite TriWest representative and the Truman VA Care in the Community supervisor on ways to reduce confusion surrounding the Choice program.

Council members span several military service eras and age groups, but we have struggled to maintain female and minority representation. One of the goals for this fiscal year is to devise a strategy to remedy this situation. In addition, Council members have been recruited to participate in other facility boards, committees and work groups to assure that we maximize Veteran participation and listen to the “Voice of the Veteran.”



CONCLUSION

The Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program in the Columbia region continues to make progress with regard to customer service at the Truman VA Medical Center. This Summary Report provides continuing accountability and transparency of veterans' experiences at the VA medical facilities and offers ideas for moving forward. The veterans who filled out the survey provided honest, constructive information regarding their experiences at the VA medical facilities during their recent visits. With this information, we compiled a summary report that reflects veterans' experiences and concerns with these facilities.

The VA's Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients Report provides the VA with a general overview of veterans' overall quality of care. Alternatively, the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey provides the VA with some specific examples of the quality of the veterans' customer service experiences at the Columbia region VA facilities.

Efforts to improve veterans' experiences regarding customer service at the Truman VA Medical Center are underway. The VA has continued to provide responses that indicate they are taking veterans' concerns seriously and are implementing procedures to streamline the deficiencies that veterans have identified using the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program. The expansion of staff at local CBOCs, new recruitment models for essential personnel, additional training in customer service and communication skills enhancing relationships between veterans and doctors, and utilization of technology as an additional informational resource for veterans will enable Truman VA medical facilities to better respond to veterans' needs and provide them with the high quality customer service they are rightfully due.

In order to maintain the momentum we have achieved thus far, we need to continue working together in order to identify areas of concern at the VA medical centers, to address the issues and to improve the quality of service that we provide to our veterans.

We encourage our veterans to continue filling out the surveys as their participation in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program is critical to the success of the program. The senate office will compile the summary reports and the VA Medical Center's responses on an annual basis.

Special thanks to the members of various veterans' service organizations who assisted in the development and completion of the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program: Robert Ross, Kimberly Tatham, James Plotts, and Michael Elmore.